DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 391 168 CS 215 185

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TITLE Gender and Empowerment in the Technical Writing Class.
PUB DATE Jul 95
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Penn State Conference on Rhetoric and Composition (14th, University Park, PA, July 12-15, 1995).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; Feminism; Higher Education; Interpersonal Relationship; *Sex Differences; *Student Behavior; *Teamwork; *Technical Writing; Writing Research
IDENTIFIERS Gender Issues; Student Empowerment

ABSTRACT

A case study questioned essentialist feminist assumptions about the marginalization of females in technical writing courses. A student team composed of a female (Jane, the team leader) and three males enrolled in an advanced writing course required of juniors and seniors majoring in the applied sciences to investigate solutions to the student parking problem on campus. Data consisted of transcripts of audiotapes from two instructor-team conferences and team- and self-assessments written by the team members at the end of the course. While three members of the team, including the leader, emphasized the team's cooperative research and writing, all four members singled out Jane as their leader, indicating that the primary mode of collaboration for this group was hierarchical. All four members of the group recognized Jane's role as team leader; the difference lay in their depicting her leadership as democratic, motivating, or dominating. Jane may not fit the feminine role of "natural collaborator" advocated by some, but she did succeed where essentialist feminists theorize she would fail. (RS)

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ED 391 168

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Gender and Empowerment in the Technical Writing Class

Much current research about gender and collaboration in technical communication begins with the assumption that females are disempowered, or marginalized. For example, recent articles by Mary M. Lay and Meg Morgan argue not only that gender is a significant factor in collaboration, but that women have difficulty attaining authority as leaders of collaborative groups. We hope to use our case of a female who epitomizes such patriarchal authority to question essentialist feminist assumptions about the marginalization of females in technical writing courses.

The Case of Jane, a "Leader of Men"

This case study examines a student team composed of one female—Jane—and three males—Kevin, John, and Leon. The students are enrolled in Thompson's technical writing class, an advanced writing course required for juniors and seniors majoring in the applied sciences, including engineering and agriculture. The team is investigating solutions to the student parking problem on campus. After consulting with university administrators, the team members have learned that the university has recently conducted a feasibility study considering the potential effectiveness of instituting a shuttle bus service on campus and from campus to the surrounding student-housing areas. After talking with the writer of the feasibility study and obtaining a copy, the team members have decided to write a follow-up report assessing the potential impact of the shuttle bus service on students. They have assumed the role of an ad hoc committee appointed by the Student Government Association.

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The description of this case is based on transcripts of audiotapes from two instructor-team conferences and the team- and self-assessments written by the team members at the end of the quarter.

The first audiotaped instructor-team conference, occurring a week after midquarter, shows a relaxed attitude on the part of all participants, most likely due to Thompson's assuring the team members that they are "far ahead" of most of the other teams in the class. The team seems ahead because Jane is holding a typed draft of the report, indicating that they have completed a draft five days ahead of schedule. Jane refers to this draft during the conference, but Thompson does review it. Although all four team members are present, Jane and Kevin are the dominant student voices, and Thompson addresses Jane as the primary writer of the draft-in-progress.

Jane: So that's all we have to do . . . is write this, finish up this, and this [pointing at the draft]. See, the problem is going to be that the meeting thing [about the shuttle bus service] is tomorrow and we won't know the results of it until Friday.

[pause]

Thompson: Ah, are you asking me a question about the draft that's due Monday . . . or I'm not sure what you're asking?

Jane: I think we'll be able to get it together if we can talk to her [the writer of the feasibility report] Friday. I'll call her. You are going to be out of town Friday? [to Kevin and Leon]

Kevin: Well, yeah.

Jane: [interrupts Kevin] I'll call her. It's [the meeting about the shuttle bus service] is at 10:00 in the morning and I don't think that any of us can go because we have class.

. . . .

Thompson: So you all are fine?

Jane: What do you mean by "fine"?

Thompson: Do you need to see me, or do you feel behind or anyone is frustrated or anything like that. Then I want to see you. But you all don't seem at all frustrated. [laughs] In fact, you are about the only ones who aren't frustrated.

Jane and Kevin both contribute to this discussion, but Jane's contribution is more substantive. She evaluates the group's progress, reports on their remaining research, and organizes the group's schedules, emerging as the leader of this informal conference.

The second audiotaped instructor-team conference reveals much more tension in the team's relationship with Thompson. With Jane, Kevin, and John present, this conference, held in Thompson's office nine days later, lasts 35 minutes. At this conference, Thompson reads a draft of the written report for the first time. The beginning of the conference, again dominated by Jane, Kevin, and Thompson, is largely devoted to clarification. Thompson learns that only the last part of the draft is original; the rest of the draft is paraphrased from the feasibility study conducted by the university and, hence, is devoted to discussing the potential effectiveness of instituting a shuttle bus service and not to assessing the impact of this change on students.

The tone of the conference changes once the problems with the draft become

apparent. The tape records a burst of talk filled with cooperative interruption and overlappings as Jane and Kevin brainstorm in Thompson's presence, drawing her into the discussion for clarification and confirmation of their new ideas. However, when Jane realizes that Thompson expects major revisions in the report, she becomes confrontational.

Thompson: You need to expand this last part [the part of the draft that addresses the impact of instituting a shuttle bus system on transportation for students]. This is going to be the . . . . This is the bottom line.

Jane: So we need format right now. I can't reconstruct.

Thompson: Okay, /let's do an outline./

Kevin: [overlapping] /[garbled]/

Jane: No. No. We're not touching it.

Thompson: That's your choice.

In using the pronoun "we" rather than "I," Jane assumes she speaks as a leader for the team. She is confident enough of her leadership to refuse Thompson's insistence that the draft be revised. Later, Jane agrees to make some revisions in the draft, but the final version does not include all the changes that Thompson requested.

The team members' self- and team-evaluation reports offer further insight into the inner workings of the team collaboration and the relative roles of the collaborators (including Thompson). All of the students make some claims for what Elizabeth A. Flynn et al., paraphrasing research by Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford, call the "dialogic mode" of collaboration. However, what Flynn et al. (after Ede and Lunsford) call the "hierarchical mode" is also present in the team-evaluations. John and Leon favor the dialogic mode,

although both call Jane the group leader. John acknowledges Jane as "our major motivator in scheduling meetings and avoiding procrastination," calling the decision-making and writing processes "'democratic'." Leon also stresses group effort, but offers a longer, and more pointed, commentary on Jane's role as leader:

> My opinion is that [Jane] emerged as the team leader from the start. [Jane] wanted to make sure everything went as planned with no delay. Since [Jane] was the only female of the group she must have felt a need to keep us boys in line. Although [Jane] was very deliberate she was also very easy to get along with. She seem to keep everything well organized for meetings, not because we ask her, but leadership and being in charge of this type of activity is just her nature.

While John credits Jane as the group's motivator and the organizer of meetings, Leon credits her with a more significant organizational role, and with a stronger (potentially dominating) personality.

Domination and control are the key issues in Kevin's team evaluation. He too describes the group's decision-making process as democratic, but he also claims, "The only disputes [in that process] were really hidden. That was really the power to control and dominate the group." While Leon suggests that Jane sought control because she was the only female in the group, Kevin claims the three males allowed her to take control because she was female:

> As far as a leader, [Jane] wanted the title. She wanted control of it all. At first, she kinda looked at me, because I thought of the idea [the group's topic], I got our sources lined up. I got the ball rolling. Then she wanted control. Everyone pretty

> much let her because of her being female and she would kinda shoot ideas down and rewrite stuff in the paper the way she wanted it to sound. So things were better letting her have the rope.

Although Kevin credits Jane's abilities as a writer for her emergence as team leader, he also points up her gender as a cause.

Jane calls herself "the leader of the group," but she also notes, "It did not take a lot of leading to get these guys to do what needed to be done." She describes her emergence as team leader as a natural process, echoing Leon's comment that it was her nature to lead. But, like Kevin, she seems to believe that the males in the group allowed this to happen, although this contradicts her gender expectations: "I was pleasantly surprised by how well the guys 'let' a girl manage the project. It was beneficial for me to gain experience as the 'leader' of men before I jump into my career." Apparently Jane's experience in this project altered her expectations, for she seems to assume that she will continue to lead men in her future career. While Kevin, and perhaps Leon, portray Jane in dominating (unfeminine) terms, Jane describes her experience as group leader positively, and looks forward to continuing to work in that role.

Jane is so confident in her leadership abilities that she sometimes challenges Thompson's institutional authority as a teacher (and as a grader). On her team-assessment, she says "We [the team] decided to let you [Thompson] help decide what would be included in the final document." Jane downplays the asymmetrical relationship with the instructor by stressing the students' right to decide to allow the teacher to help (not determine) the final product. This and other comments perhaps indicate that Jane views Thompson as her primary

rival for control of the team.

Women as Natural Collaborators?

As Flynn et al. suggest, Lay's portrayal of women as natural collaborators may be "too optimistic" (451). Lay's picture of "natural collaboration" favors the dialogic mode, while leader-dominated collaboration fits the hierarchical (and, some feminists might say, patriarchal) mode better ("Interpersonal" 25). While three members of the team, including Jane, emphasize the team's cooperative research and writing, all four members single Jane out as their leader, indicating that the primary mode of collaboration for this group was hierarchical. Jane does not fit Lay's portrait of a "natural collaborator" because she does not operate in the dialogic mode, but we need to consider other possible roles for women if we acknowledge more than one model of collaboration. Jane, described as a "natural leader" by her team and herself, is a collaborator—but not the "natural collaborator" favored by Lay.

The view of women as natural collaborators is closely aligned with the assumption that society privileges males in leadership roles. As Morgan says, "In society, women are often not recognized as leaders; often men assume or are assigned the role of leader arbitrarily as a function of their sex" (203). Jane is clearly recognized as the leader of this team. While John, Leon, and Jane all give Kevin high marks for his contribution, none suggest he led the team at any point. This contradicts Morgan's finding from her survey of 19 student teams in technical communication classes that

> In a group where a female made significant contributions to the writing and enacted characteristics usually attributed to a leader, but where a male also made a significant contribution, the male is invariably named as the leader or the group is perceived as

leaderless. (214)

Our case contradicts this assertion. All four members of the group recognize Jane's role as team leader; the difference lies in their depicting her leadership as democratic, motivating, or dominating.

The portrayal of Jane as a dominating leader could subject her to what Lay calls a "dual bind" faced by women working collaboratively: "In the eyes of many, including the woman leader, a strong woman is unfeminine and a feminine woman cannot be strong; thus women may fear success" ("The Value" 78). Although some of her male colleagues might describe Jane in terms which are traditionally unfeminine, Jane seems to reject that tradition. As a woman who thinks of herself as a "leader of men," she shows no sign of being fettered by her own fear of success.

Jane's ability to escape the other part of that bind, negative attitudes on the part of male colleagues, is mixed. Essentialist feminists are justified in assuming that such attitudes exist now and are likely to continue into the future. But their assumptions that women internalize the images others have of them and rarely achieve leadership roles because of society's attitudes are less universal than they claim, according to our case. Jane may not fit the feminine role of "natural collaborator" advocated by some, but she does succeed where essentialist feminists theorize she will fail.

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